

‘She made angry Black woman something that people would want to be’: *Lemonade* and Black women as audiences and subjects

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Abstract:

Based on interviews with 35 audience members, this essay argues that audiences used Beyoncé’s hour-long visual album, *Lemonade*, as a Two-Way Mirror to understand racial and gendered identities through the lenses of social movements, identity politics, and relationality. Our findings support Sandvoss (2005) and other audience scholars in that the Black women we interviewed used the album’s emphasis on Black femininity as a ‘mirror’ that uplifted their own racial and gendered identities. White and male audiences, on the other hand, used the album less for fashioning their own sense of self, instead using *Lemonade* as a lens to gaze into a realm of Black femininity as presented by Beyoncé, a Black woman herself. While in some cases, this perspective drove White and male participants’ empathy and support of the Black women’s experiences represented in the album, their understandings also risked one-dimensionality.

Keywords: Audience Studies; Beyoncé; Black Identity; Intersectionality; Popular Music

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. (Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*)

The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman. (Malcolm X, Los Angeles, May 1962)

For the last few years, Beyoncé has sparked conversation both in the media and in scholarly literature for her recent singles like ‘Formation’, her 2016 Super Bowl performance that

noded to the Black Panther Party, and most recently her visual album *Lemonade* that celebrates Black culture and depicts the realities of social justice issues. *Lemonade* is Beyoncé's 6th studio album, consisting of 12 tracks accompanied by an hour of stunning visuals. It was released on HBO on April 23, 2016 with little to no promotion, disrupting the album cycle.

Quoted in the media as using her influence to inspire people to 'stand up with pride', Beyoncé believes her music and visual imagery has the power to change the 'way people perceive themselves and the world around them' (Johnson, 2016). During her acceptance speech for the album at the 2017 GRAMMY Awards, Beyoncé eloquently explained her desire for the album to give a voice to the inaudible — to bring light to the pain and struggles of those without a voice and to 'confront issues that make us uncomfortable'. She referred to the media as a mirror through which her children and other Black women should see themselves, showing images that 'reflect their beauty'.

Her intention is reflected in *Lemonade*, with visuals depicting powerful Black women standing proudly, including feminist actress Amandla Stenberg, professional tennis player Serena Williams, and the mothers of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin. Beyoncé herself takes on various, dynamic roles during the 65-minute visual album, including 'a stage diva, a Southern Belle, an angry street gal, a vulnerable wife in bed, a dandy, a siren, a Voodoo High Priestess, a Victorian Gothic, and the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti, wearing a golden cone bra' (Dam, 2016). She quotes Malcolm X, flashing on the screen the faces of Black women to 'demand respect and reverence for black women' (Tinsley, 2016) and to call for a cultural shift in American values.

Scholarly literature on Beyoncé and *Lemonade* has examined how Black women view themselves through the artist's work. Through the album's visual representation of diverse Black women of all shapes and sizes, hooks (2016) refers to it as challenging the ever-present 'devaluation and dehumanization' of Black females by centering them as the norm. *Lemonade* places everyday Black women, as hooks (2016) puts it, 'spotlighted, poised as though they are royalty'. Similarly, Cooper (2014) notes that many young feminists identify with Beyoncé's work, calling it 'liberatory and productive' for Black women.

Although much of the Beyoncé scholarship focuses on empowerment of Black women, scholars also note negative implications of her work, such as Chatman's (2015) reference to the 'black girl curse' that the everyday Black woman faces. Chatman (2015) argues that Beyoncé's success promotes a narrative that Black women 'can be 'just like everyone else'', as long as they make the 'appropriate choices'. This positioning of the successful Black woman versus the everyday Black woman may negatively impact the ways in which Beyoncé's audience perceives themselves. Scholars acknowledge that the artist's work challenges the masses to re-envision how they view Black women. However, hooks (2016) argues that this new vision fails to truly alter conventional constructions of the Black woman's identity. Additionally, there is very little literature on how Black women audiences use Black-created representations to make sense of their own identity, particularly when those artifacts are also widely enjoyed by White audiences.

Based on interviews with 35 audience members, this essay argues that audiences used Beyoncé's hour-long visual album, *Lemonade*, as a Two-Way Mirror to understand racial and gendered identities through the lenses of social movements, identity politics, and relationality. Our findings support Sandvoss (2005) and other audience scholars in that the Black women we interviewed used the album's emphasis on Black femininity as a 'mirror' that uplifted their own racial and gendered identities. White and male audiences, on the other hand, used the album less for fashioning their own sense of self, instead using *Lemonade* to gaze inward at Black femininity. While in some cases, this perspective drove White and male participants' empathy and support of the Black women's experiences represented in the album, their understandings also risked one-dimensionality.

A rare and important event in popular culture, the album offered a rich representation of Black femininity from the perspective of a Black woman, and this study offers one analysis of how audiences may use this type of text as a reflection of themselves and others. We are invested in uplifting the perspectives of Black women audiences as a way of contributing to the important project begun by scholars like Bobo (1995) and taken up by others including Means Coleman (2011), Smith-Shomade (2012), and Warner (2015b). In addition, our study aims to place the perspectives of Black women in conversation with audiences from other identity groups as a way of demonstrating the nuanced similarities and differences involved in decoding *Lemonade* as an artifact created by a Black woman for Black women. We begin this project by situating it within Black feminist and womanist media approaches. We then examine the ways our participants approached *Lemonade*, taking care to centralize the perspectives of the Black women we interviewed.

Literature Review

To fully explore the ways audiences understood *Lemonade*, we begin by developing the theoretical framework for our concept of the Two-Way Mirror. We understand this concept as emerging from the album's representation of Black femininity, and therefore build from literature on Black feminist thought and Womanism as well as studies of Black women audiences and the idea that a fan object can serve as a 'mirror' for identity (Sandvoss, 2005). Intersectionality and Black feminist thought.

The discussion of Beyoncé as bringing visibility to racial justice and feminist issues highlights a major issue of visibility that uniquely impacts Black women. Means Coleman (2011) writes of the ways Black women's representations in the media are often both dismissive and dangerous, performing the 'remarkable feat of simultaneously rendering Black women invisible while also vilifying their image' (p. 37). This issue, both of the lack of visibility of Black women in mainstream media and of the illegibility caused by Black women's positions within media narratives, is mirrored in the relatively sparse literature on Black audiences and readings, particularly within the television landscape (Smith-Shomade, 2012). These interlocking systems of representations, readings, and scholarship demonstrate the ways complex webs of structures can work together and against one

another to render particular identities intangible. This claim is central to the argument of intersectionality within Black feminist thought.

As second wave feminist theory struggled to develop new ways of knowing that were not constructed through patriarchal frameworks, forms of visibility and invisibility were built into their scholarship. On one hand, Hartsock's (1983) 'feminist standpoint' is an important contribution to the goal of understanding women's perspectives as valid and crucial epistemologies. Hartsock (1983) asserts that all knowledge was socially situated, reflecting a particular perspective of reality that was limited by one's position in social hierarchy. During the early decades of feminist thought in formal women's studies programs, this was reflected as a critique of traditional academic theory that attended only to White male class-privileged scholars' perspectives. Hartsock (1983) argues that the unique social position of oppressed individuals worked as an asset which allowed the oppressed to identify and understand new questions. In short, Hartsock (1983) believes that the oppressed were often epistemically superior to the privileged. Theorizing about power, then, should begin with the perspectives of those at the bottom of the hierarchy rather than those at the top. For Hartsock (1983), this move can change the way academic understandings of power and privilege function, opening a space in which feminist theories can contribute new epistemological perspectives to scholarship.

On the other hand, developments in early feminist theory often replicate the second wave movement's inattentiveness to and dismissal of race. Feminist activists and scholars of the 1960s and 1970s have often been critiqued for privileging White, middle- and upper-class women, recreating hierarchies of race and class that mirror the sexism they attempted to combat. Both building from and critiquing Hartsock's (1983) standpoint theory, Collins (1990) argues that Black women's experiences have been disregarded by this limited perspective of feminist activism. For Collins (1990), Black women share some commonalities of experience which can be understood as a unique standpoint within the feminist movement. Though these commonalities form the basis for her concept of 'Black feminist thought', Collins (1990) was careful to note that differences in markers like class, race, and religion influence Black women's experiences in different ways. The ways in which gender, race, class, and other factors work together to create unique experiences of oppression are at the heart of Crenshaw's (1991) 'intersectionality'. Crenshaw (1991) advocates for adjustments in legal and social structure that acknowledged these intersectional identities and experiences, offering a perspective that has recently become very visible in popular, mainstream feminist organizing.

A key point in Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality is the way intersecting structures and systems render particular experiences invisible. As Crenshaw (2016) explains in her recent TEDTalk, her theory of intersectionality is specifically designed to render visible problems that fall through the cracks of current social justice understandings. The story at the heart of her germinal 1991 essay 'Mapping the Margins' recounts the ways anti-racist policy and anti-sexist policy are drawn too narrowly, so that it became impossible for the system to make sense of the unique discriminations experienced by women of color.

Offering a contemporary example, Crenshaw (2016) notes that Black women killed by police are often missing from social justice narratives; though social justice advocacy is committed to stopping violence against women and police violence against Black men, these narratives do not fit neatly together to account for Black women who are victims of police brutality. She argues, 'people have a difficult time incorporating new facts into their way of thinking about [this] problem ... because there are no frames for us to see them' (para. 11). In this and other examples of intersecting issues of race and gender, Black women are often rendered invisible by overly narrow frames of analysis or by inattention to their perspectives altogether.

Given the potential for well-meaning but overly narrow frames of analysis to isolate and exclude Black women's experiences from social justice conversations, important distinctions must be made between a truly intersectional, anti-racist feminist approach and a surface-level nod to diversity. Specifically, intersectionality should open up the roots of feminist organizing to expand who is visible in the struggle for social justice (Crenshaw, 1991). Shohat (2001) offers a useful lens for this project through her description of the 'sponge/additive' approach. For Shohat (2001), White Western feminism has often taken existing frames developed for the problems of White, middle-class American women and placed them uncomfortably onto the issues women of the two-thirds world bring to the feminist discussion. As she writes, privileged groups' epistemologies 'are extended onto 'others' whose lives and practices become absorbed into a homogenizing, overarching feminist master narrative' (p. 1270). This additive approach dehumanizes and delegitimizes the unique experiences that, as Crenshaw (1991) pointed out a quarter century ago, fall through the cracks of static, single-subjectivity frameworks. As Walker (1983) writes in her groundbreaking discussion of Womanism, Black women often bring entirely different problems, concerns, and interests to the table from White women and other women of color. For Collins (1990) and others, this can only be addressed by centralizing the unique standpoints and epistemologies of Black women both theoretically and in praxis.

Black Audiences/Black Representations

The unique standpoints of Black women are particularly relevant in discussions of Black women as audiences. As Smith-Shomade (2012) writes, since people of color are both underrepresented and overly stereotyped in popular media, Black audiences often work within the dominant structure of representation to read and understand media on their own terms. Of course, this is true of all audiences, who work within what Morley (1993) calls a 'structured polysemy' (p. 13) to interpret and build meanings from texts that fit their needs either imperfectly or not at all. A major finding for audience studies scholars, though, resulted from Bobo's (1995) germinal study arguing that Black women not only actively worked to interpret media in a way that suited their lived experiences, but also that they worked within interpretive communities to build these meanings in groups. Duffett (2013) elegantly describes this as '[o]ne of the magical qualities of popular music fandom', arguing that such fan communities offer 'individuals an opportunity to define their identities

themselves, around the pleasures that speak to them, and then to find communities based on the sharing of such personal convictions' (p. 303). Importantly, then, interpretive communities work together not only to interpret texts, but also to strategically define their own identities relative to the rest of society.

Though Black women audiences are often discussed in the literature in terms of strategically taking dominant media messages and refashioning them for their own political use, there is still much to be said about the pleasure and politics of being able to see and hear others who look like you in mainstream media. Bobo (1995) for example, highlights the ways Black women made sense of the film adaptation of *The Color Purple* through their experience reading Walker's book. While mainstream film critics saw the film as racially problematic, these women found ways of enjoying representations of women who looked like them on screen that were complex and nuanced. Twenty years later, Warner (2015a) suggests that the same weaknesses in media diversity offer a more nuanced way of understanding the ways many Black women audiences approach shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. As she points out, it is important to consider 'potential pleasures that black female audiences experience from viewing characters who look like them – even if they do not act like them – week after week' (p. 136). As important as this type of viewing and listening pleasure is, media connections like these also offer a framework for discussing political issues on audience's own terms, as Press and Johnson-Yale (2007) argue in their discussion of *Oprah* in Black hair salons. While Press and Johnson-Yale (2007) rightly argue that these women's discussions of Hurricane Katrina subverted the ways women are understood as not 'engaging in discussions of public issues in public places' (p. 308), there is a politics of pleasure at work here, too. In watching media that connects with audiences in terms of particular issues and identities, communal pleasure becomes a politics that underscores and strengthens the overt political issues of a given cultural moment.

In a media context that underrepresents Black women's identities and issues, though, the limited availability of Black representations is only part of the cultural problem. The absence of Black women in mainstream media representations is also deleterious within the larger public sphere, since it is not only Black women who are deprived of seeing nuanced representations of themselves in television and mainstream music, but White women and men who learn that Black women are invisible. Reflecting on her own experience of encountering her colleagues in public spaces and not being seen, Smith-Shomade (2012) describes the 'conditioned and supported response to not seeing Black humanity' (p. 5) as the scaffolding for ignoring texts by, for, and about people of color in popular media. As Means Coleman (2011) points out, though, Black women are not only invisible, but paradoxically hypervisible, at least in terms of largely negative, stereotypical televised behaviors. While, as Warner (2015a) argues, the exaggerated performances on shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* have important political significance to many Black women audiences, a widely circulated 2014 study found that 75% of White Americans have entirely White social spheres (Ingraham, 2014). This means that, as Dunn (2012) argues, media are not only influential in our understandings of identity, but television

representations are literally the only contact many White Americans have with people of color.

Given this context, the political power of Black women with access to the means of media production and representation – the small group of which Beyoncé is one representative – should not be underestimated. Indeed, as Bobo (1995) writes, a long tradition exists in which Black filmmakers use the tools of mainstream media to disrupt oppressive cultural contexts. It is in manipulating the hypervisibility of Blackness into something politically resistant that texts created by and for Black women carry a powerful potential for change. Snead (1985) points out that, '[b]y continuous association and repetition, false codes about black people have come to be validated as correct. Black independent filmmakers 'recode' these visual associations and use 'unconventional associations' for black people while utilizing traditional film and media language' (p. 1-2). Of course, Snead (1985) is writing specifically about filmmakers working outside the parameters of mainstream media, a position that Beyoncé does not share. Instead, as hooks (qtd in Danielle, 2014) has argued, Beyoncé appears to either reinforce or fly in the face of Lorde's (1984) assertion that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (p. 110). Though *Lemonade* worked through the media industry's White supremacist, patriarchal tools and channels of production, as we will argue here, the visual album represented an important intervention for its audiences, working as a sort of lens for more nuanced, politically driven Black women's representation in a mainstream media product.

The Two-Way Mirror of Mediated Black Femininity

The idea of the Two-Way Mirror is largely rooted in Sandvoss' (2005) 'mirror of consumption' theory. We expand this concept to account for differences Bobo (1995) and others have noted between identity group reading positions, highlighting the fact that, while some groups use a particular media artifact as a mirror, others use it both as a mirror for their own identities and, through that sense of commonality, as a lens for peering into a represented group they understand to be different from themselves.

In the subtitle for his book, *Fans*, Sandvoss (2005) describes audiences as 'the mirror of consumption'. He suggests that fans incorporate popular culture texts into their lives as ways of reflecting on their own identities, so that the fan object constitutes 'a narrative focal point in the construction of life narratives and identities' (p. 111). This is a particularly important point in discussions of underrepresented audiences, Click, Lee, and Holladay (2013) argue, since fans at the margins of society can use fan texts to shore up their sense of self, even in the face of disparaging discourses. As Warner (2015b) notes, 'The dearth of media representations of women of color means that when one such representation appears, however marginal to the media text, fans instantly transform it into an identifiable, relatable body that reflects or refracts their own value systems' (loc. 809). When popular texts speak to issues of race, Amaya (2008) notes, they may be particularly important to audience 'interpret[ations of] our histories, bodies, ideas, and social positions as those constitutive of a race' (p. 119). As he writes, '[i]nsofar as our identities are cocreated with

the social, these hermeneutic techniques also render the world intelligible and allow us to see it as a racialized landscape, subject to evaluation, acceptance, or rejection' (p. 119). Popular culture texts, then, can serve as a mirror for understanding identities within a larger context of discourses about where we fit in and where we do not.

If, as these scholars argue, fan texts can function as a mirror for our own identities – including the ways we should interact with others with similar and divergent values and interests – how might resistant messages in popular culture offer new ways of understanding others in relation to the self? Though Sandvoss (2005) argues 'engagement with the object of fandom constitutes an interaction with fans' own vision of self' (p. 159), we suggest that such a perspective may be unsettled when performers foreground the ways their identities are radically different from many of their fans. Since audience studies has largely centralized White performers and White audiences (Smith-Shomade, 2012; Warner, 2015b), Sandvoss (2005) argument hinges primarily on fans who, in the broadest construction of visual identity, look like their fan objects. In these cases, as Sandvoss (2005) explains, fans may not push themselves to find the 'otherness' (p. 149) in media texts. We would suggest, though, that media texts like *Lemonade*, which foreground Black femininity, may invite White and male audiences to engage with difference and gaze into a perspective centering Black femininity. In this way, *Lemonade* is acting as a Two-Way Mirror by allowing audiences to reflexively see themselves in its general themes of relationships, infidelity, grief, and healing, while it also offers an inside look into Black femininity. Contrary to the White and male audiences, Black women used *Lemonade* to see themselves within the media both relating to the same themes as White and male audiences but also seeing themselves represented and sharing similar experiences in media. As we will argue in this article, this situation can offer space for progressive engagement, offering a rare instance for Black women to find a 'mirror' for the self in mainstream culture as well as a different type of engagement for White and male audiences; we describe this situation as a Two-Way Mirror for Black femininity. In the Two-Way Mirror perspective, audiences whose identity aligns with that represented in an artifact may use it as a mirror for their own identities, while audiences who see the represented group as different from themselves may use the artifact as a lens for gazing in at that group based both in common experiences and in experiences they understand as different.

Method

Because we were interested in exploring how audiences understood the messages and made sense of the themes presented in *Lemonade*, with IRB approval, we recruited anyone who had seen *Lemonade* through personal contacts and social media posts. One tweet was retweeted by fan page @Bey_Legion, which garnered 120 retweets and 207 favorites, leading to our largest and most regionally diverse recruitment surge. Beyoncé fandom was not a prerequisite for participation, but potential interviewees had to have seen the *Lemonade* visual album. Participants varied in their enthusiasm for the singer, but all but three of our 35 participants considered themselves Beyoncé fans.

Between May and July of 2016, we conducted 35 interviews with participants from five countries. Interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes and were conducted in real time either in person, by phone, or Skype with a video component. The interviews yielded 278 single-spaced transcribed pages, which we coded for themes regarding audience interpretation of *Lemonade*. In the interviews, participants were asked a variety of questions, including whether or not they were fans of Beyoncé, when they first saw *Lemonade*, and if and how they felt she was speaking to current social justice issues. To protect participant anonymity, we did not explicitly ask for demographics, though most chose to reveal identity specifics such as race, sexuality, and generational affiliation during the course of the interview.

A Portrait of Two Fans

Though we did not limit our call for participants by race or gender, we noticed throughout our interviews that our participants tended to be either Black women or White men. As we further explored our data, we also noticed that there were important differences between the ways participants in these two groups approached *Lemonade*, illustrating the ways Bobo (1995) and others have noted that audiences read texts through a lens of their identities and experiences. Specifically, while the Black women we interviewed found pleasure in seeing people who looked like them reflected back at them through *Lemonade* (see also Warner, 2015), the White men we spoke with often seemed to be interested in learning more about Black women in social justice movements and in general, and used Beyoncé's visual album to gaze inward at Black femininity.

To illustrate the ways fan identity framed *Lemonade* as a Two-Way Mirror for Black femininity, we begin our analysis by offering a portrait of two of our participants whose responses were representative of others like them. We use this section to highlight the individual experiences of these audience members, following the audience ethnography tradition (Lotz, 2000), as well as to demonstrate the ways the three themes we discuss later fit together to form a cohesive fan experience of watching the much-anticipated visual album.

Ebony

We interviewed Ebony approximately three months following the release of *Lemonade*. She had been a fan of Beyoncé's since 'Destiny's Child', recalling:

I was pretty young, too ... I'd be singing like 'Soldier' and like 'Cater 2 U' and like all those songs that I had no idea what they meant ... I think I might have been in like fourth or fifth grade ... so I think I liked them in like '04, '05.

A connection with Beyoncé from a young age was common among the Black women we interviewed, such that the singer's work had played in the background of their childhood and teen years, as they developed their identities. Beyoncé, then, was 'intrinsically interwoven with [their] sense of self' (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 96) through her sustained presence in their lives. Still, Ebony was reluctant to watch the visual album, only watching when her friend offered her iTunes login information. This type of interaction, in which a friend insisted that one of our participants watch *Lemonade*, was very common among the Black women we interviewed. This type of communal fandom ran parallel to the ways many of our Black women participants read *Lemonade* as a reflection of unity, a quality they valued. Ebony saw the album as telling the story of 'a woman's experience':

everybody is always like, 'You don't do anything for the Black community' ... I think in this instance, there were a lot of things, she had very specific mothers. You know what I mean? Like Mike Brown's mom, who was it? Eric Garner's, I think Eric Garner's mom ... even like, having like Amanda and Zendaya, you know those people. It was her statement where she didn't even have to say anything. Kind of a 'I stand with you and I see what's going on and I understand what's going on'.

Here, Ebony articulated the ways she understood *Lemonade* as speaking to a community of Black women who are uplifted by the visual album. Ebony, like many of our Black women participants, articulated the perception of Beyoncé's Black solidarity alongside their own position within a community of Black women friends and family members. This theme, of Black women supporting each other, was common among the Black women we interviewed both in terms of *Lemonade* and the things these women valued in their own lives. In other words, Black women's solidarity not only reflected Bobo's (1995) concept of interpretive communities, but also demonstrated one way our Black women participants saw their own values reflected in Beyoncé's performance (Sandvoss, 2005).

Ebony moved fluidly between discussing the relational aspects of her reading of *Lemonade* and highlighting the importance of social justice themes in the visual album. She saw *Lemonade* as a message specifically addressing Beyoncé's Black audiences:

she was trying to educate people when she did the spray painting, like 'Stop shooting us', cause those were very blatant words. But in the symbolism ... you're only going to get it if you get it ... if it's not blatantly there, a lot of people could just be like, 'Oh I never even realized ... I don't know why that kid was in the hoodie'. Or then you have the spray paint that says 'stop shooting us'. They're very – although they have the same sort of connotation, it's like I think she's more allowing Black people to know, 'I see what's going on y'all'.

Much of Ebony's reading of the visual album spoke specifically to the idea of Black women and men as interacting with *Lemonade* through hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990). In this way, she articulated a sense of shared identity and values with Beyoncé, demonstrating Sandvoss' (2005) argument that an 'object of fandom comes to function as a self-reflective extension of self' (p. 121). At the same time, this identification extended into an awareness that Black women and men would likely approach *Lemonade's* social justice themes differently than White audiences.

In many ways, this spoke to the third theme we identified with our participants, in which audiences appreciated the representations of Black women's identities. Ebony understood Beyoncé's message as making a statement about her own identity,

I don't want y'all – like Caucasian America – to think that I don't know ... and to forget that I'm Black'. You know what I mean? I think that's what 'Formation' might have genuinely been about is like, 'Please don't forget that I'm Black'. Like, 'Please don't forget that I'm really from Texas', and do you know what I mean? 'My baby is about to wear her hair as a Black person should and my husband really got to have the nose that he does.'

Speaking to Bobo (1995) and others' research into Black women as cultural readers who interpret representations of Black women in 'productive and politically useful ways' that sometimes contrast the ways White audiences interpret those same texts, Ebony told us,

I think [Beyoncé] has a lot of White fans, who I think would have liked it but I don't know that they would have gotten the same thing I did, or appreciated it in the same ways as I did ... Because so much of the album is rooted in pain and hurt. In just being the underdog.

Though Ebony was less specific about the album's particular visuals uplifting Black women, she repeatedly referenced the ways Beyoncé's visual representation of Black femininity was specific to the messages she took from the album, noting that White audiences would likely not understand *Lemonade* in the same ways she did. Ebony's reading, in other words, included an awareness not only that the album reflected the identities of Black women like her, but also that White and male audiences would experience the album's Black feminine representations from an outside perspective.

Michael

The same day we interviewed Ebony, we also spoke with Michael. Identifying himself as 'a very big' fan, Michael told us he had been listening to Beyoncé since 2013, starting much more recently than Ebony. This did not negate his enthusiasm for *Lemonade*, though, as he watched the premier immediately on HBO and 'like ten other times' following. Like Ebony, Michael discussed relationships, social movements, and identity representations, but his

approaches to these topics were different from hers, demonstrating his use of *Lemonade* not only as a reflection of himself, but as a way of gazing in on Black femininity from an outside identity position.

One important distinction between Ebony and Michael was Michael's emphasis on *Lemonade's* infidelity narrative. When we asked Michael how he would describe *Lemonade* to someone who was not familiar with it, he responded,

There were a lot of rumors that Jay-Z cheated on her. I would say that this is probably her response to that whole thing. I feel that she used it for like, [to clarify] the rumors, and she's obviously still with him. She just kind of used it as a platform to show people she's moved past cheating and relationships.

He clarified that the primary message of *Lemonade* for him was that there are 'ways to learn to trust people and get them to move past things', and returned to this point later in the interview to lament his perception that,

People kind of like – they seem to ignore the fact that it's about healing, and they just pan right away to the whole cheating part of it ... I feel like not as many people focus on the healing part as they do on the cheating part.

Michael's emphasis on interpreting the album as a message of healing speaks to audience tendencies to interpret media texts through a lens of their own lives; while the Black women we interviewed focused on the ways *Lemonade* portrayed relationships specifically through the lens of a Black woman, Michael and other White men we interviewed tended to look at the album as a narrative about infidelity and healing in a much more general way.

While Michael did identify social justice themes in *Lemonade*, he saw this as secondary to the infidelity narrative. After we had discussed Beyoncé's relationship with Jay-Z, we asked whether he noticed other messages in the album, and he shared, 'Oh, I definitely think that she commented on the rights of colored people. Especially the whole police brutality thing and everything happening.' This was the first of two instances in which Michael used the term 'colored people'. We reject the term 'colored people', given its historical use as a tool of racist oppression. We do not include it here to shame Michael, but rather to illustrate an important potential for fan objects and texts. To us, Michael did not demonstrate malicious intention in his use of the term, but rather a level of ignorance perhaps indicative of a lack of interaction with Black peers often caused by the de facto segregation common to most areas of the United States. Michael also seemed hesitant to entirely align himself with contemporary social justice issues, noting that people's opinions of *Lemonade*

really depends on the person. Personally, I'm not a very biased person ... I feel like I'm a mix of Republican and Democrat when it comes to certain issues. I feel like politics really tie in on people's opinions of [*Lemonade*].

Given this context, people like Michael may be unlikely allies in the movement for Black lives. Yet, through his admiration of Beyoncé as an artist, Michael was brought into the national conversation about police violence and racial inequality. Therefore, while we are hesitant to declare Michael a victory in the struggle for racial equality, his case represents the power of popular media as a political tool, in this case for social justice.

Lemonade also functioned as a Two-Way Mirror for Michael to offer insight into Black women's identities. While many of our White participants specifically mentioned specific representations within the visual album, Michael told us about observing other fans' reactions, particularly those of Black women:

A lot of people feel that Beyoncé hasn't really embraced her, I don't know if this would be the appropriate word to say, but her Blackness or her color until recently. I feel like a lot of girls feel, especially women of color, they feel that since today the whole police brutality thing and everything, a lot of people are like embracing their Blackness and stick up for themselves.

Here, Michael indicated an interest in the ways people of other identity groups interpreted Blackness, and he used the visual album to look beyond his identity, gazing inward onto *Lemonade's* Black women—a group with whom he seemed to have little, if any, in-person interaction in his daily life. As Black women audience members like Ebony looked for their reflections in *Lemonade*, White and male audience members like Michael looked through the Two-Way Mirror in attempts to better understand Black femininity. Unlike the Black women we interviewed, then, some non-Black men and women used *Lemonade* as a way to explore others' identities and learn about others' reactions to a fan text they loved.

Having presented an in-depth account of two representative participants, we now explore these themes, of social justice, identity representation, and relationships, as they emerged across our 35 participants.

Black Women and Social Change

The founding of Black Lives Matter by three queer Black women has, for many, highlighted not only the ways Black women's standpoints can contribute to leading powerful, effective public protest, but also the long history of women of color as key players in movements for social justice (e.g. Williams, 2017). At the same time, controversy over the Women's March in Washington, which resulted in the original White organizers turning over the protest to three women of color, indicates that Black women are still often overlooked for these roles. Since *Lemonade* was released into a context in which social justice organizing was at the

foreground of public discourse, largely through the Black Lives Matter movement, Beyoncé's audiences read the video through the lens of social movements.

For many of our participants Beyoncé functioned, through *Lemonade* and her Super Bowl performance of 'Formation', as a voice of social justice, taking on a role that has traditionally been filled by Black men movement leaders. In the interviews, participants were asked if they recognized any themes pertaining to social justice throughout *Lemonade*. Though many participants very generally acknowledged the nods to the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality, Black women participants were more apt to relate that back to why it was important for Black women. Abby (a Black woman) noted that Beyoncé played a role in spreading awareness about Black Lives Matter and the issues of police brutality against Black men and women. As she noted, of Beyoncé's massive audience, 'hundreds of thousands of people ... may not have known about Black Lives Matter or social issues'. The positioning of Beyoncé not only as a Black social justice leader, but specifically as a Black woman visible as a spokesperson for Black Lives Matter, indicated the race/gender intersection some of our participants articulated. Abby noted that *Lemonade* is 'about the woman's experience, and Black Lives Matter is a part of the Black woman's experience in 2016'. The intersection of gender and race was important to *Lemonade's* audiences, as the video offered a specifically gendered message that was integrally connected to contemporary, ongoing social movements. For Yolanda (a Black woman), Beyoncé's message was articulated specifically through frames of gender: "'Listen world, something has to change. Wake up, look and see this is what we are experiencing as women. As African American women. African American mothers.'" [Beyoncé] seamlessly ushered in an entirely different social movement through her art'. Tamika, another Black woman, also understood Black Lives Matter as building up Beyoncé's message, perceiving a reciprocal relationship between the movement and Beyoncé's more personal narrative: 'There's a Twitter user, DeRay [Mckesson], who's very influential in the Black Lives Matter movement. He would always make reference to *Lemonade* and I feel like him bringing that to his followers and making that more known can really not only help people understand Beyoncé's message, to really get what she's talking about'. In each of these cases, the Black women we interviewed articulated a specific connection between social movements and *Lemonade*, highlighting Beyoncé's role as a cultural leader in the movement for Black Lives. More specifically, Beyoncé seemed to act as a cultural leader in drawing attention to Black womanhood and its value within social movements.

While the theme of social movements came up with several of the Black women we interviewed, this was notably more prevalent among our non-Black participants. Tim, a White man, understood the way Beyoncé was 'crossing new boundaries' by 'taking on this Black Lives Matter movement head on'. This was in contrast to Yolanda, who pointed out that celebrities have long been involved in social justice activism, and disputing the idea that engaging in social movements represented a 'boundary' for Beyoncé. Noting that racial discussions had been difficult for them prior to *Lemonade's* release, Drew and Josh, both White men, felt that the visual album started discussions among new constituencies, an idea

that did not come up in interviews with our participants of color. Drew noted 'it brought a lot of people into the conversation because they found a way they could talk about ... something as daunting as racial equality and Black issues'. Josh similarly said the album was 'really controversial, and it started discussions'. Our non-Black participants discussed issues of Black Lives Matter as new conversations. While we were happy to hear our White participants were able to see a way into racial justice organization through Beyoncé's work, we were struck by the way our White participants discussed ongoing social justice issues as new topics Beyoncé allowed them to engage, as opposed to our Black participants who largely saw Beyoncé as continuing a conversation and making it more public.

Across racial and gendered lines, Malcolm X was a particularly popular topic of discussion among participants. In the song, 'Don't Hurt Yourself', Beyoncé samples the civil rights leader speaking the line that serves as the epigraph for this essay: 'The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman'. While women of color including Tamika remembered 'the Malcolm X speech', White participants like Josh noted 'a quote in *Lemonade* ... from Malcolm X', and felt that 'Beyoncé is on a course to [bring that quote to light] and say this should not be how it is'. Similarly, Amelia (a White woman from England) found the quote 'was so powerful. Talking about social injustice, that really makes sense'. Beyoncé's Malcolm X reference, too, prompted White fans like Drew to look more deeply into civil rights history. Though some participants, like him, had heard of the civil rights movement, specifics of its leaders were less clear, with some participants incorrectly indicating, for example, that Malcolm X had been the leader of the Black Panther Party (Drew). Over all, participants were familiar with Malcolm X, but found his remarks on Black women particularly powerful.

In their experiences as audiences of *Lemonade*, all of our participants commented on the presence of social movement rhetoric within the album. Notably, though, White participants did not associate the civil rights movement with Black women or seem to have a sense of how Black women's work was central both to the success of the movement and the injustices that necessitated it. Black participants, particularly women, on the other hand, saw Beyoncé's message in the visual album as a continuing argument that preexisted the singer and even themselves. Their perspective on *Lemonade* was more clearly intersectional, highlighting the way, as Darius, a Black man, noted, 'Black women are so overlooked too many times, but they are pivotal when it comes to social change ... and getting movements started'. In discussing these social movements, the ways Black women can become invisible within intersecting systems of oppression was made clear, but this clarity was, of course, different for our Black women participants than it was for others. While social movement participation may work as a mirror for Black women to see their own trials and triumphs, this perspective became a lens to look from the outside in for White audiences of the visual album.

Identity Politics and Representation

Illustrating the feminist mantra ‘the personal is political’, Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* not only served as a Two-Way Mirror for Black women as social movement leaders, it also deepened understandings of Black femininity in the performance of identity. As our participants told us, *Lemonade* offered Black women a concrete message of visibility against cultural erasure and functioned as a mirror to fashion their identities in opposition to limiting media representations. In this way, the visual album provided a mirror for progressive Black femininity that is rare in mainstream media texts. The resistant imagery of Black women’s identity performances also resonated with the non-Black women and men we interviewed who realized, either through *Lemonade* or previously, how rare and important multidimensional representations of Black femininity are in popular media. The album offered a politics of identity offering a Two-Way Mirror into resistant performances of Black womanhood.

There are several scenes throughout *Lemonade* in which Beyoncé uses imagery from African cultures, showcasing native hairstyles and highlighting native religions. Commenting on ‘I Ain’t Sorry’, Haley (a Black woman from England) pointed out that Beyoncé’s imagery was something that made her comfortable with herself: ‘you see their hair styles from the Yoruba tribe and the Igbo tribe, it’s women who are queens that have that hairstyle... I actually did one of the hairstyles [because] it’s who I am, there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s where my parents are from’. Additionally, participants who identified as Black women felt that *Lemonade* validated their culture for themselves as well as other audiences. Aisha (a Black woman) stated that she ‘...also enjoyed just seeing Beyoncé embrace the Black culture, the Black hairdo ... I appreciate because she knows the impact she has on the Black community and women in general’. Also highlighting the connection between the cultural politics of Black women’s hair and heritage, Yolanda remarked, ‘From our hair, to our relationships ... all of those things that affect us as women. Our slave heritage. Our Native American heritage’. These observations are largely important because Haley, Aisha, and Yolanda all gave similar responses pertaining to Black hair and Black women’s visibility when asked what they liked about *Lemonade*. Just as the Black women participants in Warner’s (2015b) study of *Scandal* fans spoke often about the politics of Black hair, the Black women we interviewed focused on the importance of representing culturally specific hairstyles as a primary signifier of *Lemonade*’s identity politics.

While our non-Black participants still appreciated Beyoncé’s representations of Black femininity, they did not focus on particular aspects of identity performance but instead discussed the multiplicity in Black women’s identities. Darius mentioned, ‘I think that her album really encompassed the different intersections of a Black woman, like being a sister, being a mother, being a lover, being a daughter ... All of those things’. Though these various identities offer a multi-dimensional representation of Black femininity, they also point to issues of ownership, as they portray Black women only in relationship to family. Referencing the limited ways women’s agency is presented in popular media, Sean, a White man, noted the importance of Beyoncé ‘embracing her sexuality and her freedom to be as sexual as a

man can be'. In these comments, participants highlight the ways Black women's identity performances are limited by stereotypes and oppressive cultural norms. While feminism has worked to resist these social mores, the movement has often overlooked the particular ways women of color – particularly Black women – experience sexualized media stereotypes. Beyoncé offered a counter to the stereotype by presenting her sexuality with a sense of ownership. One White man we interviewed highlighted a specific instance in which the importance and impact of media representation is demonstrated; Tyler described a scene in which Black women are seated around a colonial dining table and noted, 'Taking those high class colonial typically white colonial culture and putting themselves in place, is really something that really, kind of like a jab, like a sucker punch'. For Tyler, this scene represented resistance to the limited positions in which Black women have been represented, particularly in colonial culture. Though these discussions of resistant representations of Black women differ in content, they are all focused on understanding Black femininity as something more complex than traditional media allows.

Unlike these White and/or male participants, the women of color we interviewed had more unified reactions to *Lemonade's* identity politics. Beyond simply presenting representations of Black women, valuable for audiences of all genders and races, *Lemonade* negated and reclaimed media stereotypes surrounding Black women. For Jessica (a Black woman), *Lemonade* portrayed that 'It's okay to be angry. It's okay to be upset'. Mia (a Black woman), too, saw Beyoncé's message as 'it's okay to feel angry and lash out, and say things out of emotion'. This narrative was helpful for Black women in legitimizing their own feelings through displaying this in media. One of the more striking scenes in *Lemonade* was the song 'Hold Up' in which Beyoncé walks the streets smashing cars with a baseball bat. For Aisha, this scene was a step toward undoing harmful and limiting media narratives about Black women: Beyoncé was 'going around and being feminine and beautiful but portraying an angry Black woman in a way that is acceptable. She made angry Black woman something that people would want to watch and be'. This scene served as a mirror for Black women to see themselves and validate their emotions and how they choose to display them. Warner (2015a) writes, 'no representation can embody the totality of a multidimensional self, not to mention that the percentage of black female bodies on television is consistently low' (p. 139). One unique aspect of the invisibility/hypervisibility of Black women on television (Warner, 2015a; Smith-Shomade, 2012) is that absence of relatable moments of overwhelming emotion. Through scenes like this one, Beyoncé allows the space for a complex identity in which a Black woman is seen as angry but justified.

The emotional heft of 'Hold Up' and *Lemonade's* other highly emotional tracks resonated with participants of other racial and gender identities as well. While stereotypes about Black women differ from those about Latina women in important ways, the controlling image of women of color as angry, emotionally overwrought is common to racist, sexist imagery of both groups (Rodriguez, 2008). As Teresa (a Latina woman) told us, 'there's definitely that feminist aspect that you see when she's upset and angry ... there definitely is a focus on women becoming more powerful, even though they are the victims

of extreme struggle'. Shanice (a Hispanic woman from Mexico), too, understood Beyoncé's heightened emotional representations as a feminist performance noting, 'she touches the theme of feminism by empowering yourself as a woman to be the girl who cries, to be that girl who is angry and they don't give a damn if you think crazy. It's like, yes, yes, I'm angry and sad and ... I don't care because this is me. This is me expressing myself'. Citing a body of feminist literature, Ahmed (2004) writes that emotions have historically been used to subordinate women, a claim that is particularly true for women of color; by repeatedly associating emotional openness with instability and irrationality, women who aspire to positions of power in deliberative democracy have been discredited. Many of our participants praised Beyoncé's emotionally expressive representation of Black femininity, in which emotional performance enhanced the artists' message rather than disarming it. Realizing and articulating the universality of emotional overflow, Darius commented 'It's like all types of emotions that I feel like anyone can go through and relate to'. These emotions, which Tim described as 'It's sadness, it's anger, it's a feeling of redemption', actually strengthened Beyoncé's message for many audiences: 'Lemonade is by nature very deeply connected to the artist's emotion. Not just socially or personally, but just connected to a lot more authentic humanity. The fact that she gets you to focus on a lot of social issues was a really good thing' (Drew). Just as the Black women we interviewed were inspired by Beyoncé's reclamation of the 'angry Black women', *Lemonade* made visible and then broke down the controlling power of the stereotype for those gazing inward at Black feminine identities.

Making Relational Connections

Beyond allowing fans to reclaim stereotypes of 'angry Black women' and the 'Latina spitfire', *Lemonade's* focus on emotional vulnerability and overflow also offered our participants a relational lens through which to understand Beyoncé, themselves, and others. In this way, participants articulated Sandvoss's (2005) mirror metaphor alongside the idea of fan and interpretive communities. Bobo (1995) describes the ways Black women audiences create communities of resistant labor, working together to redefine the ways media texts represent, and more often fail to represent, their identities and experiences. This experience is communal and, as Warner (2015b) notes, emotional. In addition, Click, Lee, and Holladay (2013) note that the affective community fans experience applies not only to relationships with one another, but also to parasocial relationships between fans and their fan objects. For our participants, a third layer of affective relationality was present through the depiction of romantic relationships in *Lemonade*; while many of our participants did not believe Beyoncé's relationship with Jay-Z was a primary purpose of the album, the widespread cultural dialogue about the album's possible representation of the couple's marital problems bubbled beneath the surface of our interviews. These varied forms of relationality represented a third dimension of the Two-Way Mirror of identity for our participants.

A notable difference between the Black women we interviewed and other participants was the use of *Lemonade* as a lens for better understanding Beyoncé; though all of our participants saw relationships of some kind as part of the album, a specific interest in romantic relationships was prominent among participants who were not Black women. *Lemonade* seems to follow Beyoncé's apparently fictional break-up story and her road to rebuilding herself. As a White woman, Emily told us, she could not understand Beyoncé's experiences as a Black woman but could relate as a woman, stating, '... for me this album really made me *feel*. Like it's a really interesting journey of forgiveness and marriage'. Darius also found the emotional nature of the relationships in *Lemonade* as 'an opportunity to look into Beyoncé'. In 'Hold Up', for example, he connected with the intensity of love, noting, 'that frustration, that humanity that people feel, that emotion that I feel like some people come across in relationships, that was to me that was relatable. I felt like I've loved people so much that I could hit a car'. Some participants also interpreted this focus on romantic relationships through the lens of their own experiences. As a child of divorce, Sean observed, 'in 'All Night' [Beyoncé] says, 'Our love is stronger than the pride'. That's also saying that she wanted to work on it, and that her husband wanted to work on it as much as she did'. As Sean went on to explain, the difference between her parents and her understanding of Beyoncé's experience is the choice that Beyoncé made to stay. These specific interrogations of Beyoncé's relationship were common among White and male participants, but nearly absent among the Black women we interviewed.

In place of the focus on Beyoncé's relationship, the women of color we interviewed tended to focus on familial and ancestral relationships, serving as a generational bridge for some audience members. Abriana (a Hispanic woman from Portugal) reflected on discussing the album with her father; while he recognized that the album foregrounded Beyoncé's racial and gendered identity, he 'didn't think it was a big deal because she goes through what every black person goes through'. In other cases, *Lemonade* opened the dialog between generations that helped shape the audience member's perception of the visual. Shanice observed from the 'Freedom' visuals that '[Beyoncé] portrayed a load of black women, a load of colored women, and they're all embracing their afros, and their culture, and their heritage. I thought that was empowering definitely'. This allowed Shanice to not only reflect on her personal ancestry, but to use *Lemonade* as the lens to see into the ancestry Beyoncé portrayed of Black women. Aisha noted that the different types of ethnic hairdos throughout *Lemonade* fostered a sense of familiarity because her mom wore one of the hairstyles. Aisha noted that this display 'just shows the diversity of her appreciating a generational span of Black culture and showing how it's progressed and how it can still be embraced'.

Lemonade's narratives span generations, and our participants were deeply moved by its universal themes of love, redemption, grief, rebuilding, and empowerment. Performances of identity in the album went beyond offering a mirror for Black women, reinforcing Sandvoss's (2005) concept of the 'mirror of consumption'. The album also worked as a way of creating relatability between family relationships and romantic

experience across race and gender boundaries. In this way, the relational journey of the album allowed audiences to peer in at Beyoncé's journey while simultaneously reflecting on their own experiences.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have argued that *Lemonade* serves important roles for audience members, and particularly for Black women. First, since *Lemonade* was released in a time when social justice movements were at the foreground of public discourse, the album acts as a lens for audiences to view social justice movements through, such as Black Lives Matter. Next, the album gave Black women audiences an opportunity to interpret and develop a personal identity. The participants reported relating to *Lemonade*, in the sense that they were able to see themselves in the album. Finally, through its focus on emotional overflow, the album allows audiences to interrogate relationships, an area that differed in focus between Black women audiences and other participants we interviewed. Through its rich representation of Black femininity as a multi-faceted and diverse set of identities, *Lemonade* offered a way for Black women to understand themselves while also offering other audiences an opportunity to engage with non-stereotypical mediated Black womanhood.

We engage with Sandvoss's (2005) 'mirror of consumption', the idea that fans incorporate popular culture texts into their lives as ways of reflecting on their own identities. This concept is particularly important for Black women, working as a lens to interpret their history and social positions (Warner, 2015b). Black and feminist audience scholars note that popular culture texts serve as a mirror for audiences to understand their identities within a larger context of resistant and oppressive discourses. We expand on this idea, arguing that media texts such as *Lemonade* not only act as a mirror for the self, helping to shape fan's identities, but they also work as a Two-Way Mirror. Media texts offer insights into how the identities of others work with and through audiences' own sense of self. In this essay, we examined how *Lemonade* acts as a Two-Way Mirror, reflecting the experiences of the audience, particularly of Black women, in media. We acknowledge that including just 35 volunteers may have resulted in the recruitment of more eager and invested participants than if we had included others who wouldn't have volunteered. However, we did reach saturation, and even continued interviewing following that point to make sure our participants' viewpoints were common, at least among the group we aimed to recruit.

The body of literature considering Black audiences, and particularly Black women, is disparagingly sparse. We call for more work on Black women as audiences because, as Crenshaw (2016) notes, 'when you can't see a problem, you pretty much can't solve it' (para. 16). We hope our findings have contributed to rendering visible the unique issues and experiences of Black women, demonstrating the ways Black women use media texts to identify themselves as well as the ways other races may shape their understandings of Black women through media. While there has been some controversy surrounding the album, this study demonstrates the important intervention *Lemonade* made for its fans.

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